

INTRODUCTION

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) adopted by governments at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 is a milestone document for advancing women's rights and equity worldwide. For the first time, the international community agreed to a comprehensive blueprint of formal commitments supporting the full development of women and their equality with men in many key areas.

The BPFA is a strong statement of political will and commitment on the part of governments that has been useful to women's movements everywhere in pushing for their political, economic and social demands. Although it does not carry the same legal weight as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which was adopted in 1979, the BPFA provides standards and concrete references for pursuing fairness and reasonableness in the relations of the sexes.

Neither women's relationship with the state nor their co-determination of the broader ambit of politics and governance was ever directly addressed by any of the 1990s conference (Antrobus, 2004). The BPFA, however, partly broke this pattern when it took on the issue of political justice for women as one of its critical areas of concern. Section G on "women and power and decision-making" focused on ways by which women's participation in public leadership and governance may be advanced and the goal of gender balance in political representation and decision-making achieved.

Nevertheless, several commitments were qualified with the phrase 'where appropriate' (for instance, sections 190b, 190d, 190h) or were mildly articulated in words such as "consider" rather than in a stronger language such as 'commit' (for instance, sections 191a, 191b, and 191c). These qualifications reveal an international consensus underpinned by a range of positions among governments with regard the full and rapid integration of women in governing bodies and political parties.

The goal of equality between women and men in governance was expressed in relation to fairness, democracy and transformation (Section G.181). A co-equal

share of males and females in governance reflects more appropriately and justly the reality that half of the governed are women. Furthermore, having women's voices and interests heard and recognized in decision-making mechanisms and processes result in a more vibrant working democracy. But more than these, the BPFA declares that women's political participation constitutes a positive move toward infusing governance itself with women's perspectives and interests, thus giving it substance and character.

Specific commitments were made to various aspects of political leadership and governance, in order to reach stated goals. Foremost was setting the goal of gender balance and taking concrete steps toward its achievement in governmental bodies, committees, judiciary, political parties, government-funded institutions, research and academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, national, regional and international organizations, as well as the private sector. The BPFA also called for the reform or creation of mechanisms, programs and processes that would remove built-in discrimination against women, ensure their representation and participation in decision-making, and build their capacity for public leadership. Finally, commitments were made on the conduct of regular monitoring of women's representation in both the public and private sectors and the widespread sharing of women-specific data.

A Contested Space

The issue of political justice for women goes beyond the goal of equality between women and men in governance and leadership that is found in the BPFA. For women in the South who often find themselves in situations where democracy is adopted only in rhetoric and form, or dominated by an elite minority, and where a complex of political, economic and socio-cultural forces consistently undermine citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms, integrating women into politics means co-optation into an unjust system. Questions such as, "Shouldn't our principal effort be aimed instead at challenging the state?" are raised at the local/national and global spheres. Such concerns are critically relevant for women in Southeast Asia where various forms of autocracy and elite democracy reign.

In the run-up to, during and after the Beijing Conference, women's movements from various places shared differing levels of enthusiasm for and expressed a range of concerns around the BPFA commitments to gender equality in governance and decision-making. But no one opposed it. Governance nevertheless is a contested space and women often find that there is a "dual nature" to their engagement (Taylor, 2000). Women's engagement with the state is at once critical and collaborative.

Monitoring Ten Years of the BPFA

As we commemorate the tenth year of the BPFA, we need to ask not only what have been achieved regarding commitments implemented but more so, what have been the impact of women's participation in politics on the broader women's movement. How have women who have been integrated into the institutions of power and decision-making been able to make a difference for the majority of women citizens in their country? Have gains really been made toward transforming governments and institutions to become more women friendly? Have women's entry into politics enlivened democratic governance? Interrogating all these, what knowledge and insight can be derived from the decade-long struggle to put women in positions of leadership?

The South East Asia Women Watch, a network dedicated to monitoring the implementation of the BPFA, engage with these political concerns through a monitoring framework anchored on the intertwined concepts "women's power and agency". The framework made it possible to interrogate three intersecting questions. How are women faring in terms of occupying positions of governance and public leadership? Are women able to exercise real power after having acquired formal power? Finally, what are the structural and institutional factors in governance and politics that constrain women's agency or their capability to make autonomous choices and decisions?

This volume contains five country studies providing a general view of women participating in the terrain of governance and politics in Southeast Asia, ten years since the BPFA was adopted. Written by activists and researchers who are closely linked with the women's movements in their countries, the volume also gives insight into the forces and processes that underlay the statistics constituting research results. Strong resemblances run through the country studies, despite their differences in contexts and research emphases. The emerging regional scenario, unfortunately, is not encouraging and point to very real and serious concerns.

Losing Numbers

Women's participation in various levels of governance has not shown any significant improvement either in terms of numbers or in the power that it wields. None of the countries came anywhere near the 30 percent target of having women in political positions of leadership which was strongly advocated by women's groups in 1995. Women's numbers in high level government positions have risen and fallen at a doldrum's pace by slight margins. The numbers game has been unpredictable, with some trends appearing to signal stagnation, if not decline. Particularly stark is the Philippines' case where the number of women in the Senate has dramatically dipped from one election to another. Not even the emergence of female heads of states, such as, Gloria

Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines or of Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia could strengthen the numbers. The slight increase in the number of women that was noted in Thai national politics was attributed to the support for women's leadership among small and less influential political parties. The writer, moreover, reported that the bigger more prominent parties remain strongly male-dominated as they have traditionally been so.

Women, however, continue to fare better in the lower and middle rungs of the bureaucracy and in local governance, their traditional positions. A glass ceiling in the bureaucracy and in both appointive and elective positions seems to be as entrenched as ever and remains difficult to break.

Persistent Patriarchies

Socio-cultural beliefs about women's inferior status to men and their inadequacies as leaders are principal constraints on women's participation in elections and in governance in general. These beliefs are often shared by both ordinary men and women. Apart from family and school socialization, these views are actively mediated by new social authorities in the communities that promote ideological views reinforcing prejudice against women and other social groups. In Malaysia, for instance, a newly emerged religious political party went so far as to announce that women cannot stand up as candidates. Religious teaching was also cited in the Indonesian report as a factor inhibiting women from public life. Women who are able to hurdle such and make it to government and political parties only find themselves in a more constraining environment. Women leaders have to contend with the pervasive male brotherhood and some need to struggle against macho politicians who resist women's presence in politics or who mistreat them in varied ways, from promotion bypass to sexual harassment. A much publicized case of the Thai Prime Minister condoning a minister's unprofessional handling of a woman senior subordinate, exemplifies the machismo culture in government that still persists. Male privilege inside government and politics also account for the inaction by officials to women's advocacy for a clear sexual harassment policy in countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Reforms With No Bite

The country studies highlight several constitutional and legal guarantees as well as gender and development plans that are, for various reasons, not implemented. In some cases, such as in Cambodia, affirmative action for women in politics and the bureaucracy remain at the talk-shop level. In Indonesia, the commitment made by political parties to setting a quota for women candidates and nominations, were undermined by political maneuvers such as giving male candidates the winnable areas while women were put up as candidates in areas where their parties had less chances of winning. In

the Philippines, commitment to gender mainstreaming among line agencies is rarely matched with budgetary allocations. A strong lobby will be needed to effect real changes in this area.

Lingering Uncertainty with Women in Politics

The sub-region's women's movements continue to have a dilemma with putting women in political positions as a focused strategy in a sub-region where elite democracy and/or autocratic regimes persist. While a range of different women's groups and organizations come together around advocacies for laws, regulations and programs that promote women's rights and welfare, there is less unity around supporting women candidates. Tensions exist between women's groups of the educated middle class that pursue more actively the redistribution of political power and those that work more vigorously on economic redistribution among the politically marginalized. For instance, attempts to rally women's groups behind the quota system for women in political parties in Indonesia were only partly successful while in the Philippines, a women's sectoral party was unable to sustain its base of voters and eventually lost its seat in Congress. At best, women's movements remain friendly to individual women politicians who are seen as critical allies and whose support they court behind certain policy reform agenda.

Women's Welfare, not Political Equality

Throughout the country studies, one finds the Southeast Asian governments treating women's rights almost exclusively as a welfare issue that is linked to poverty alleviation and the protection of the vulnerable. This may be seen in programs addressing poor women's practical needs and in efforts to curb the trafficking of women and girls. In many places, women's welfare is associated with the preservation and protection of the family and pursued within an ideological frame that invisibilizes the conflict and inequality between males and females and instead valorizes the "complementarity of the sexes". Some national machineries for women are instituted in ways that attach women's affairs to family welfare/development (Thailand & Malaysia) or to veterans' affairs (Cambodia). In contrast, there is less attention given to the promotion of women's political empowerment and equality, as indicated, for instance, by the long-drawn struggle of women's movements to put in place regulation that would protect women in government from sexual harassment, or in the case of the Malaysian women's movement, the demand for a more democratic space that guarantees the fundamental right of women and men citizens to organize for political action.

Transforming the Mainstream

The road to women's equal participation in power and decision-making in the Southeast Asian region remains as challenging as ever. In many cases, a weak

link exists between women leaders and the women's movements. Further advances in the mainstream political arena will depend on the strengthening of these links, and on the organized efforts of Southeast Asian women working together with other like-minded groups. It is absurd to think that the patriarchal state will legislate itself away. Neither will it be realized only through the efforts of women who enter the mainstream. The transformation of governance and public leadership can only be achieved through a broad and sustained struggle marked by diverse efforts, positive tensions, as well as gains and setbacks. The women's movements in Southeast Asia have traveled far, and grown from the small fragmented groups that they were more than ten years ago, to groups and networks gone much bigger, acting with a persistence that promises to continue for many years to hold governments to account and to transform. The monitoring initiative that produced this volume certainly manifests such a promise.

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